

Table of Contents

HERO HIGHWAY

WHEN LAST WE LEFT OUR HEROES...

Keep up with the news from Hero Games. This issue – HeroSphere, *Champions Universe*, and *Conquerors, Killers, And Crooks*. 2

HEROGLYPHS

See how Steve Long himself answers rules questions. This issue – casual characteristics other than STR. 3

CHAMPIONS LEFTOVERS

See the sample powers that fell onto the *Champions* cutting floor! 5

HERO UNIVERSE

Check out The Characters That Hero Forgot. This issue – Der Sturmvogel. 6

YOU GOTTA HAVE CHARACTER

Josephine Baker was an entertainer of many talents. 9

ADVICE ALLEY

CLASSIC BITS

Some plot elements show up in just about every comic book. You can integrate these ideas into your *Champions* game. 16

THE GM'S TOOLBOX

Don't forget these supplies that are always handy to have at a game. 19

POINTLESS CHAMPIONS

No, not pointless that way! We're talking about playing *Champions* without worrying about point totals. 21

EVIL EXPRESS

THE WAYS OF THE WICKED

Play your villains effectively, by making them truly evil. 26

MEGAVILLAINS

Some bad guys deserve more game time than a simple fight. Play those ultra-powerful menaces as they truly deserve. 33

RESOURCE ROAD

THE EFFECTIVENESS RATING

Just because a character falls under the Active Point cap doesn't mean he's balanced. This worksheet helps prevent abuse. 47

MERIQUAI FALLS: NATIVE SONS

The Native American people of Meriquai Falls believe in totem spirits, and have a strong and detailed mythical history. 54

CHARACTER CORNER

COBALT

This vigilante master of mass has a grudge against his creators. 60



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Classic Bits by Jacob Russell

Alternate Earths

The concept of Alternate Earths was introduced to super-hero comic books in the mid-1950s and the medium hasn't been the same. The Alternate Earth concept was originally used to reconcile contradictions in continuity between the Golden and Silver Ages. However, the idea became popular enough that the premise was expanded to create other types of stories until the continuity became too complex for anyone to track.

Though today many people have mixed opinions of this premise, the literary device of Alternate Earths is an indispensable part of many super-hero comic book sub-genres (especially "Silver Age" comics). Despite the modern abandonment of Alternate Earths, the convention survives in other forms in other comics to this day. The thought of another Earth with an eerie resemblance to our own remains compelling.

Alternate Earths can take many – even *infinite* – forms. Regardless of what type of Alternate Earth is being used, there are always common elements between the stories. All Alternate Earths are significantly different to the original Earth of the story, except that it contains alternate versions of the main characters. Even if the Alternate Earth was created by some timeline-altering event that took place centuries before the protagonists were born, analogues of them still exist. The three most popular versions of this literary device are: Parallel Earths, Alternate Timelines, and Independent Earths.

Parallel Earths are Earths from a "parallel dimension." This means that there is another universe out there that is traveling in the same direction, but does not necessarily have the same origins or the same destination. On a Parallel Earth, most or all of the characters from the original story exist on this other Earth, but with significant differences. A character from one Earth will have powers based upon magic while on the Parallel Earth the same character will have the same powers, but with a scientific basis. Gardner Fox's Earth-2 and Earth-3 from DC Comics is a classic example of this kind of Alternate Earth.

Alternate Timelines are similar to Parallel Earths in that they contain an Earth with recognizable character and culture analogues. The main difference is that the Earth from the Alternate Timeline was created when some key historical event occurred differently, and thus created this other world. Sliding Albion from "The Authority" is an example of an Earth from an Alternate Timeline.

The Independent Earth comes not from another timeline or dimension, but from this universe. Somewhere else in the same universe, a planet formed and evolved in an almost parallel way to our Earth. An Independent Earth can be a sister planet on the other side of the Sun from us, or some kind of lost celestial twin in another star system. Counter Earth from "Adam Warlock," and Mirror Earth from "Tom Strong," are examples of Independent Earths.

PLAYING ON AN ALTERNATE EARTH

Alternate Earths are a fun place for the players to explore, and for GMs to create. On the one hand, the Alternate Earth is new and different from the old and can hold much fascination. On the other hand, it is always similar enough that it doesn't require as much explanation and exposition from the GM. We know what humans look like. We know what flora and fauna to expect from virtually any Alternate Earth. What we don't automatically know is that on this new Earth, America is a totalitarian government that inducts all super-humans it encounters.

Whatever is different about the Alternate Earth, the GM should decide what it is that drives the player characters back to normal Earth. If the Player Characters have well developed personal lives back on normal Earth, this shouldn't be a problem, as they will need to get back to them. However, if the Player Characters don't have well-developed lives, or unhappy lives, then they may like the idea of setting up new lives in this other world. If this is not the direction you want the campaign to take, then steps should be taken to make the Alternate Earth less hospitable.

Aside from exploring another world, Alternate Earths also offer the possibility for the players to explore their own characters. By role-playing in a world where their characters are regarded as villains, failures, or mythical figures, the players will be able to explore a different role-playing experience with the same character. Players who are bored with their characters may even see a way to take their character in a new direction.

TRANSPORTATION FROM EARTH TO EARTH

In deciding how transportation works between Earths, the GM must decide if the Alternate Earth is to be a significant part of the game. If the GM only wants the Alternate Earth to provide the occasional short-term adventure, or evil duplicate villain (see below), then the "doorway" to the Alternate Earth needs to be

The Ways of the Wicked

by Steven Trustrum

The Ways of the Wicked

It is likely safe to say that if you enjoy a well-crafted superhero campaign you acquired the taste from reading comic books. As such, you are well aware that reveling in the sheer maliciousness of any given issue's villain is as important to the experience as reading about the heroes' exploits: sometimes the guy we are meant to hate is unavoidably the most fun part of the story. However, designing a fun and interesting villain is not as easy as it may sound.

Certainly, a stumped GM can always open a few comic books and take inspiration from a single diabolical personality, or amalgamation thereof, but is that enough? Will this make the villain stand out and deliver an evening of fun gaming? While experienced GMs may already have a few tricks to resolving the problem of designing and playing memorable opponents for their players to face (though it can never hurt to learn a few more), neophyte GMs may be looking for some help getting started. Hopefully, herein you'll find the advice and tricks you're looking for.

IT AIN'T EASY BEING EVIL

The first trick to creating a great villain is to present a character that is not merely a punching bag for the heroes to toss around at their whim. GMs should portray the villain as something far more than the sum total of his statistics; personality, disposition, motivation, history, relationships, and so much more are all factors to be reflected upon. For instance, how will the villain react to the player characters' egos, ethics, and goals? How will he prepare for the heroes' specific powers and tactics? Will the villain learn from his defeats and be tougher to beat the next time around or is he the type that is too dumb or stubborn to know what is best for him?

How a GM decides to portray a supervillain will forever define that character in the players' minds, obliging the GM to ensure that his bad guys are as interesting as possible from the word go. An opponent's initial impression is the most telling and remains with the players the longest, so the GM had better make it a good one.

One of the easiest (and safest) ways to depict one's villains is for the GM to employ time-tested archetypes, be it the mindless brick, cackling madman, loudmouth braggart, or calculating thinker. However, if the villain is meant to be a recurring part of the campaign, the players may quickly grow bored with the same old stereotypes and begin begging for something better and more engaging. Therefore, in the long run, it is usually best to exploit clichés solely for a bad guy's foundation and then mix things up

from there by throwing a few (or, better yet, many) curves at the players' expectations.

Some good tips are to give one's villains personality quirks that go against the rest of their image and therefore will be surprising and fun, once revealed. Maybe Colonel Cruel, would-be dictator and general hardcase, is afraid of the water, or perhaps Doctor Dark, mass murderer and tyrannical commander of a legion of evil super soldiers, is secretly in love with a powerful (and beautiful) superheroine. There is no such thing as being too creative (or too sinister, for that matter) when it comes to designing one's villains. In fact, the more imaginative and off-the-wall the bad guy is, the more fun the players are likely to have. Go nuts.

Achieving that comic book feel also requires the GM to play up to his creation. What good is saying that the cad cackles insanely as he wantonly destroys city blocks if the GM doesn't try his best to imitate that chilling laugh? Just as comic books rely upon good storytelling and masterful artwork to make the reader say "wow, now *that's* a cool villain," so too must the GM employ all of his bag of tricks to ensure that his players love to hate the bad guys that they square off with each session. Foxbat, if played with gusto and all of the GM's maniacal heart, is a shining example of just how much fun a villain can be, even if he gives the players a sound thrashing.

But what if you are still having problems coming up with some cool and refreshing ideas of your own? No need to worry, we're here to help.

WHAT MAKES A BAD GUY GREAT?

One of the more prominent problems with many supervillains is that they can come across as a carbon copy of a well-known bad guy; even if the character's name has changed, the players realize who has inspired their opponent. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing – most players enjoy squaring off against a somewhat familiar face from time to time. On the other hand, such similarities can make it difficult for GMs to surprise the heroes. Having read about the villain's iconic inspiration, the player characters are likely to use familiar tricks taken from the related comic books rather than devising fresh tactics of their own. Considering that the purpose of role-playing is to have fun while creating and participating in an ongoing story, a campaign that turns out to merely be rehashing an existing comic book plot will likely lose its appeal to players and GM alike rather quickly.

artwork by Derrick Thomas